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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: RIYAD SEIF: WHAT IS HIS POTENTIAL?

REF: A) DAMASCUS 0254 B) DAMASCUS 0207

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The SARG's January 18 release of former MP Riad Seif (with four other Damascus Spring detainees) has provoked a surge of assessments and predictions about his potential and his plans. Contacts are divided about Seif's political prospects, with admirers noting that Seif, a Damascene Sunni, is a charismatic figure with broad political appeal. Skeptics dispute this level of actual or potential support and point to what they describe as his lack of political skills and vision for the future. We assess that Seif has substantial potential as an opposition political figure but anticipate vigorous SARG's attempts to divide the opposition and intimidate Seif supporters, in order to prevent him from building a democratic movement and establishing a political party. If those SARG maneuvers are unsuccessful, re-arrest of Seif would likely represent the regime's default option. End Summary.

¶2. (C) A DAMASCENE SUNNI: Since former MP Riad Seif's mid-January release, a range of contacts have offered estimates of his potential political support and assessments of his capabilities. Many contacts note that Seif, a Damascene Sunni, is a charismatic figure with broad political appeal, the only such figure among a Syrian opposition that is which is dominated by feuding personalities, parochial interests, and negligible grass roots appeal.

¶3. (C) AN ENTREPRENEUR: Unlike many in the opposition who have emerged from aggressively secular leftist movements of the 1960's and 70's, or from the Islamist Muslim Brothers, Seif is a self-made businessman (and a supporter of a free market economy), with a background as a mainstream politician. He is from the Midan neighborhood of Damascus, a religiously conservative, middle-class area defined by the twin influences of Sunni merchants and religious clerics, according to historian and political analyst Sami Moubayed, who knows Seif well. That background makes him an appealing figure in Damascus. His reputation as an enlightened entrepreneur, who treated his factory workers quite well (far better than the Syrian norm) has also engendered some working class support for Seif.

¶4. (C) SECULAR BUT NOT ANTI-RELIGIOUS: Seif himself is secular in orientation, describing himself to the Charge recently as "a non-practicing believer" (ref A). That secular orientation gives him appeal among religious minorities in Syria fearful of being swamped by the Sunni Muslim majority in any post-Ba'athist scenario. It also appeals to Sunni secular elites. However, Seif is not aggressively secular, presenting himself as one who respects

religion and can represent the interests of the Muslim faithful, by far the largest bloc of voters in Syria. Seif made a point of mentioning to the Charge that in the mid-1960's he had belonged to the Muslim Brothers for a year or so, and that during his imprisonment, he had received feelers from exiled MB leader Sadr al-Din Bayanouni, expressing interest in cooperating to form a political party when Seif was released.

15. (C) UNCORRUPTED, UNLIKE KHADDAM: Seif's almost five years' imprisonment, in tandem with his refusal to accept any SARG deal for early release, have reinforced his image as an uncorrupted politician and burnished his reputation in ways that the Asad regime is likely to find discomfiting, particularly if, as expected, he uses the corruption issue as a political tool. The fact that the regime bankrupted him before sending him to prison, with selective, confiscatory tax rulings and other trumped up charges of malfeasance is also likely to make Seif a more appealing figure. Unlike former VP Khaddam (ref B), widely viewed here as discredited by his corruption, Seif is seen by many as a potential alternative to Asad. Film director and opposition figure Nabil Maleh told Polchief he viewed Seif as a potential prime minister in a post-Ba'ath government and has started quietly mentioning that possibility to others. Dozens of opposition figures (and other more mainstream political figures, such as MP's) have been visiting Seif since his relief, giving some indication that he is a uniting figure among the opposition.

16. (C) ALLIES AMONG OTHER DAMASCUS SPRING DETAINEES: Seif has other allies among the Damascus Spring detainees with whom he plans to cooperate in forming a political party, which should also strengthen his appeal. The most influential among them are the recently released pan-Arabist lawyer, Habib Issa, and the still-detained economist and intellectual Arif Delilla. Both are impressive Alawite opposition figures, according to our contacts. (Note: According to fellow Alawite intellectual Hassan Abbas, Issa and Seif, while friends and political allies, have very different views on some key issues. Seif has left prison proclaiming openly his pro-American tendencies, says Abbas, while Issa's pan-Arab nationalism and anti-American tendencies became more pronounced during his years of detention. Fawaz Tello and Walid Bunni are unimpressive figures unlikely to offer Seif much value, said Abbas. Seif himself acknowledged to Charge that fellow MP Ma'amoun Homsy had been a corrupt smuggler with little education and would not be welcomed as a political partner.)

17. (C) SKEPTICS QUESTION SEIF'S APPEAL: Not everyone here shares the view that Seif has tremendous political potential. His detractors question whether he has any broad political appeal, insisting that he is not that well known and that those who know him tend to dismiss him as "a merchant" not qualified to be viewed as an alternative political leader of Syria. Civil society figure Amr al-Azm noted that Seif has been out of circulation for five years and is isolated politically. Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi, who offered a nuanced assessment of Seif, noted that the regime has released him at a time when he will find it difficult to develop any political opening. The regime has wrapped itself in the Syrian flag and whipped up nationalist (and pan-Arab and anti-American) sentiment in ways that will make it more difficult for Seif to attack it, and will make him vulnerable to charges of being an agent of the Americans.

18. (C) CAPABILITIES ALSO QUESTIONED: Several contacts also question Seif's political skills and depth of experience in politics. Moderate Islamist MP Mohammed Habash, who expressed satisfaction with Seif's release, nonetheless noted that when he visited him afterwards, Seif sounded more like a "an angry demonstration leader" than a politician capable of using savvy and political cunning to build coalitions and put pressure on the regime. Habash also questioned Seif's claim to appeal to the religious faithful, sniffing that "he is a secular man who does not share our program." Long-imprisoned Communist dissident Fattah Jammous, an Alawite, dismissed the

release of Seif as "not a very important step" and discounted his political prospects. Jammous assessed that opposition efforts to have the Emergency Law canceled, all political prisoners released, and basic rights granted for free expression and association would continue and would not be appreciably bolstered by the release of Seif. Some of this naysaying about Seif represents legitimate questioning and some of it seems characterized by the typical ax-grinding and jealousy one confronts regularly among the opposition and political elite. Habash for example likely views Seif as a future political competitor (and unlike Habash, one who is untainted by years of collaborating with the regime).

¶9. (C) SARG REACTION A CRITICAL LIMITING FACTOR: Beyond any political limitations Seif suffers from, the critical factor limiting Seif will be the SARG's reaction to his attempts to build a democratic movement and establish a political party. Many observers expect the SARG to re-arrest Seif -- as it did with fellow Damascus Spring detainee Kamal Labwani and Habib Saleh -- if he creates any problems or overly embarrasses the government. Abbas, for example, dismissed any notion that the regime would be reluctant to create a political headache for itself by re-arresting Seif. Others thought that the SARG would hesitate to re-jail Seif, but would put tremendous pressure on his associates and potential followers, with intimidation, surveillance, and possible trumped-up charges and imprisonment. They also doubt whether the SARG will let Seif proceed very far in organizing any new political party, using the Emergency Law and the SARG's monopoly on the media to prevent him from spreading his message. The SARG is likely to try to persuade the Saudis to limit Seif's access to satellite TV networks like al-Arabiyya, as it did with Khaddam, if Seif's appeal seems to be getting out of hand. With the security services' penetration of the opposition, the regime is also likely to try to divide opposition forces, opening talks (likely to go nowhere) with one wing, for example Hassan Abdul-Azim's Democratic Gathering, as a way to block Seif from building coalitions or gathering any political head of steam.

¶10. (C) OVERALL ASSESSMENT; DANGERS SEIF FACES: Seif's supporters and his detractors make valid points but probably overstate their cases to a degree, although the detractors seem to be a bit more enthusiastic in their efforts. Seif strikes us -- by far -- as the most appealing figure in the opposition, with the potential for drawing a substantial political following from a broad base of groups in Syria. He is charismatic and exudes some populist appeal. With his reputation as an uncorrupted political figure enhanced by the courage and sacrifice evident with his prison years, he can potentially cast a large shadow on the Syrian political landscape. He also seems to have a definite political vision for the future, which emphasizes democratic development in Syria. Nonetheless, Seif will have to demonstrate in the coming weeks that he has a plan and specific ideas for surmounting existing obstacles, such as the SARG's monopoly on the media, the fear-inspiring reputation of the security services, as well as existing divisions in the opposition in order to achieve his political objectives. Otherwise, the government may not need to do much to actively repress his efforts. If Seif does devise effective tactics, the government is likely to weigh in at every possible juncture in an attempt to limit his political future. If those SARG maneuvers are unsuccessful, re-arrest would likely represent the regime's default option. Seif also mentioned the possibility the regime might at some point try to assassinate him.

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